

Organizing Speech-Writing Competitions

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OBJECTIVES

By participating in speech-writing competitions, students will:

1. develop a clearer understanding of the nature of government and the duties of elected officials.¹
2. increase their knowledge of the candidates and their platforms.
3. compare and contrast writing and speaking styles.
4. participate in civic meetings and decisions.
5. understand the process by which an individual contacts public officials.²
6. improve research and writing skills.
7. develop organizational and creative thinking skills.

METHODS

The following methods can be used to explore the art of speech writing with your students:

1. Study the art of speech writing.
2. Plan and organize a speech-writing competition.

1. Regardless of the type of competition, the speech contest fits neatly into the recommendations of the proposed National Standards for Civics and Government. These standards call for a more applied and active approach to the study of government and related institutions. Writing a speech for an elected official helps fulfill this goal and also assists students in reaching another goal of the new standards: active citizenship. To actively take part in the competition, students need to learn about election issues and candidates as well as about the method by which civic improvements may be implemented. Here, again, the objectives of the standards are being met as students demonstrate knowledge of the political process, the ability to define civic life and politics and a thorough understanding of the distinctive characteristics of American society. The new standards also suggest that students thoroughly understand the selection of our political leaders and the interacting, monitoring, and influencing aspects of the political process. Speech-writing competitions offer students this opportunity, as well as opportunities to master the listening, discussing, researching, and speaking skills the new standards mandate.

2. The new National Standards for Civics and Government suggest that students learn how to identify and contact public officials by the fourth grade. See the new standards, Section III.

It's not the quality of the winning entries that will determine your success, but the number of participants and the learning experience in general.

1. Study the art of speech writing.

Compare speeches of current candidates or public officials and historical speeches of prominent candidates or public officials. How do the writing styles of the speeches differ? What devices are used in each? Do they appeal to you logically? Emotionally? With what issues are today's citizens most concerned? Citizens of the past? How do the responsibilities of public officials today compare with the public officials in the past? (For example, compare the role of the president in ensuring a healthy economy now and before the stock market crash of 1929. How are they the same? different? How did the stock market crash of 1929 affect the president's economic responsibilities?) According to current candidates, how is the role of the government/public officials the same or different? How has the role of the government/public officials changed in the past 50 years? 100 years?

2. Plan and organize a speech-writing competition.

The following steps can be used for a variety of competition formats:

- ★ Develop the parameters of the competition.
- ★ Select a theme or topic.
- ★ Secure judges for the competition.
- ★ Provide students with sample topics.
- ★ Decide on a location and time.
- ★ Involve the media.
- ★ Generate interest in the competition.
- ★ Involve family members.
- ★ Judge the entries.
- ★ Present awards.
- ★ Follow up.

A. DEVELOP THE PARAMETERS OF THE COMPETITION.

Choose a format for your competition:

- ★ writing a speech for an elected official
- ★ writing a speech on the given topic and presenting it before an audience of parents or elected officials
- ★ role-playing an elected official by writing and delivering a speech as he or she would (complete with costumes!)

Consider other logistics such as: When will the entries be due? What will be the maximum number of words accepted? Who will participate in the competition? Will the competition be limited to a class, grade level, school, or district? Will the top 10 entries be winners or will they be semifinalists who deliver their speeches in front of a panel of judges and an audience?

Another idea is to have schools prejudge all the entries and select the best at each level for finals. This can be done by limiting the number of finalists from each school or grade level. It is important to use this method so as not to lengthen final judging. This is especially important if you decide to have a public-speaking contest rather than, or in addition to, a speech-writing competition.

Once the entry rules are set and judges have been selected, be sure to give all teachers, possible participants, and judges copies of the competition guidelines.

B. SELECT A THEME OR TOPIC.

The competition theme is an idea generator and the more it allows for individual interpretation the better. Stress themes and topics related to participatory democracy, such as the importance of voting and democratic institutions. Consider "What Difference Does One Vote Make?" as an example. Students might write about citizens' rights and/or responsibility to vote, or interview a family member. They might write about how elections in a democracy can be won with one vote, or times when one vote changed history. Students might review regulations about obtaining citizenship in the United States and the authority of citizenship.

One of the most natural themes would be an issue of concern to elected public officials. For example, students might draft Congressional speeches about budget cuts for a Senator who is working on cutting the federal budget. A member of your Senator's or Representative's staff can provide you with a list of his or her priority issues.

C. SECURE JUDGES FOR THE COMPETITION.

Who will judge the entries: school principals or teachers? judges? retired teachers? members of the League of Women Voters? members of elected officials' staffs? local public officials?

The strategy for dealing with elected officials is straightforward. Using letterhead and emphasizing the importance and nonpartisan nature of the mock election, ask elected officials for assistance in the areas you deem necessary (e.g., providing examples of their speeches, judging entries, attending the event, listening to their "stand-ins"). Be sure to follow your letters up with phone calls and don't hesitate to be persistent. Many times public officials are difficult to reach because of their hectic schedules. If you get frustrated, try contacting the public official's community relations coordinator or scheduling coordinator. Keep track of those with whom you speak and ask to speak with them again whenever you contact that office. Addresses, phone numbers, and E-mail addresses for members of Congress are provided in the attached Resources Section and the phone numbers of local and state officials can be found in your phone book.

Congresspersons are especially vital as they are needed to place the winning speeches in the Congressional Record and also to provide assistance by writing letters of support to local constituents. Most Congresspersons have a newsletter and mention of your event in that epistle bodes well for the contest.

Recruit other potential judges through media announcements, posters, flyers, announcements at meetings of local organizations, school newspapers, and community newsletters.

D. PROVIDE STUDENTS WITH SAMPLE TOPICS.

Providing sample topics is not an end in itself, but a tool to stimulate student thinking and encourage participation. A list of suggestions might include priority issues from a public official's office, political cartoons, quotes, or headlines from recent newspapers and magazines or the most important issues addressed at a local town meeting. Good sources for topics are *TIME* and *Newsweek*, the Mock Election's Internet page (www.nationalmockelection.org) and the *World Journal* for international current events.

If students write speeches for candidates, encourage them to read the candidate's past speeches to familiarize themselves with his or her presentation and writing styles. (To obtain past speeches, write to the candidate, whose name and address is usually listed with the local or state offices of his or her political party.)

Elementary students are going to represent a challenge because their preparation for a speech competition is more limited. To this end, a demonstration tape could help them in preparing their entries and provide assistance for other teachers.

E. DECIDE ON A LOCATION AND TIME.

You may wish to hold the contest in a school or service organization's meeting hall. However, look into holding it in a large mall or public area where the students can get a larger audience. Check the school calendar to make sure there is not a conflict with important school functions. Usually the best times for this competition are those around election dates.

F. INVOLVE THE MEDIA.

There are numerous ways to involve the media, from advertising your event on the local TV or radio station to having the local media sponsor your event. If winning students deliver their speeches before an audience of parents, teachers, community members, and local public officials, consider inviting local media to cover the event. (See Chapter 4 of this guide for more information on this topic.)

Videotape all the competitions so that parents and other interested parties can get a copy. (It's also of great value in case there is a close competition and the judges want to compare speeches.) If the media is unavailable, perhaps a videotape of the competition could be sent to local TV and radio stations.

G. GENERATE INTEREST IN THE COMPETITION.

Regularly circulating new information to participants or potential participants (re: new judges, prizes, etc.) will help generate and maintain excitement about your event. Schedule speakers for your classroom or school who are related to the competition theme (e.g., a real speech writer from a local campaign, the Registrar of Voters, or a speaker from the Board of Elections).

H. INVOLVE FAMILY MEMBERS.

Don't hesitate to ask family members for help; they typically seek out new ways to be involved in their children's education. They can provide students with primary research information about past elections, judge the competition, recruit public officials, secure facilities and/or resources, dress up and appear at the event as past politicians, or emcee the event. Don't let this list limit your thinking — the options are endless. Ask parents how they might like to be involved by sending a letter home with students.

I. JUDGE THE ENTRIES.

There are many examples for judging an event but consider a 60-point format — that's 10 points for each of six categories, including:

- ★ **organization.** Is the material well organized and does it have a clear introduction and conclusion?
- ★ **content.** Does the writing show that the contestant used the library and researched the subject matter?
- ★ **creativity.** Was the chosen topic appropriate and presented with an original flare?
- ★ **viewpoint.** Is it clearly presented and supported?

- ★ **topic.** Is the subject appropriate? Would this speech be given by a member of Congress or the Governor?
- ★ **overall presentation.** (grammar, syntax, appearance).

In many professional competitions, the average score for each entry is used after eliminating the highest and lowest scores.

For public-speaking competitions, consider these categories:

- ★ **presentation.** (clear voice, well-spoken, good use of body language)
- ★ **content.** (relates well to title and theme of competition, good use of quotations and primary sources)
- ★ **creativity.** Does the speech demonstrate a new way of thinking about or presenting the subject matter?
- ★ **making the point.** How well did the speech make its point? Was it well organized? Did it have a clear introduction and conclusion? Were there redundancies?
- ★ **impact.** Did the speech impact the judge about the issue or idea?

J. PRESENT AWARDS.

All participants, winners or not, should receive a certificate of participation. Perhaps local businesses (book stores, music stores, restaurants, or movie theaters) could provide gift certificates to participants, semifinalists or winners.

Also consider sending student speeches to the appropriate public officials or candidates, regardless of whether or not they are winners. Perhaps candidates or public officials will use your students' speeches in their own speeches.

K. FOLLOW UP.

Announcing the winners at the appropriate school board meetings brings credit to the student, teacher and school, and builds goodwill for next year's match. Also, thank-you notes, and copies of the *Congressional Record* if the winning speeches are printed, are a must for those who volunteered their services or donated prizes.